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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 000164

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USTR FOR J BUNTIN  
COMMERCE FOR ITA/ANE

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FEBRUARY 4 MEETING WITH PM SHAIKH  
KHALIFA

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

1. (C) In their February 4 meeting, Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa and the Ambassador discussed Ashoura processions and the appearance of posters of foreign Shia leaders, rule of law, Commerce Secretary Gutierrez's upcoming visit, and U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement (FTA) promotion and implementation, among other subjects. The PM's son, Deputy PM and Minister of Transportation Shaikh Ali bin Khalifa, also participated in the meeting. The PM opened the meeting by noting he had just left his "majles," an open session he holds several times a week for citizens to come and discuss their problems and issues directly with him.

2. (C) Shaikh Khalifa said that, in the run up to the celebration of Ashoura, photographs and posters of Ayatollah Khamenei had begun to appear in Shia villages, as they did last year. (Note: Emboffs and local staff have not yet noticed any posters.) He supported citizens' right to practice their religion, but they should not ally themselves with foreign political leaders. The PM continued with a theme he said he had just discussed with participants in his majles. He emphasized that the rule of law must be applied uniformly across the country. He was unhappy with the Minister of Justice's application of the law, saying that when a Bahraini traveled abroad, he respected the laws of that country. The same should happen inside the country. (Comment: While he did not explain fully, we believe he was referring to the Ministry of Interior and Justice's decisions not to prosecute some Shia youth who have been involved in periodic clashes with police since the end of November 2005.)

3. (C) The Ambassador told the PM that Commerce Secretary Gutierrez would visit Bahrain February 26-27 to promote the FTA. The PM said that the timing of the trip was very good and would enhance the already strong relations between the two countries. He hoped that the agreement would lead to more joint ventures between American and Bahraini companies, which would generate additional jobs and training opportunities for Bahraini workers. There are many business opportunities in Bahrain, and now is the time to act to exploit them.

4. (C) The Ambassador said that the USG hoped the FTA would enter into force on April 1 and asked about the status of intellectual property rights legislation needed to implement the agreement. Shaikh Ali said that the prime ministry's legal affairs committee was examining the draft laws and the cabinet planned to move them to parliament very soon. The PM said the GOB wanted to implement the FTA as soon as possible and strengthen bilateral trade and investment relations.

MONROE